

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN HENRY CUELLAR, as prepared
Subcommittee on Border, Maritime, and Global Counterterrorism
Committee on Homeland Security

**“Visa Security and Passenger Pre-Screening Efforts in the Wake of
Flight 253”**

March 11, 2010

Today, the subcommittee is meeting to examine visa security and passenger prescreening efforts in the wake of the Flight 253 incident on Christmas Day.

It is my hope that this hearing will build on the Full Committee hearing held in January.

Now that we have an understanding of the failures that left us vulnerable to attack, the subcommittee is examining what steps DHS, the State Department, and their Federal and international partners are taking to address those vulnerabilities.

Along with other Members of this committee, I recently had the opportunity to view some of those efforts firsthand.

Last week, I visited Customs and Border Protection's National Targeting Center and was briefed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement about their Visa Security Program.

I am encouraged by much of what I learned.

Securing our skies starts on the ground and I'm glad that CBP is doing more to screen passengers prior to departure for the U.S., even though they only have a physical presence at a limited number of airports.

They are making the most of existing technology and utilizing relationships with regional carrier liaisons, which makes good sense.

We must not forget that our Airports are also border ports of entry.

Also, ICE is moving forward with deploying additional units under its Visa Security Program, or VSP, to strategic, high-risk visa issuing posts around the world.

However, more remains to be done.

We need to look at how CBP can further improve its prescreening process to target those who seek to do us harm, without unduly delaying legitimate travelers.

We also must explore whether we're making the most of the ICE Visa Security Program, and if it should be deployed to additional high-risk embassies and consulates.

Furthermore, we should examine how the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security can improve their coordination and cooperation.

I've always advocated that as government agencies share more information, their performance increases.

I know that ICE Assistant Secretary John Morton has been visiting our embassies to conduct outreach and discuss the program.

I will note that I was troubled by the State Department's recent denial of a VSP application for a post in the Middle East.

If that's a sign of the commitment to interagency cooperation post-Flight 253, then clearly we have a ways to go still.

I was pleased to hear that State has since reversed its decision; however, and hopefully that will set the tone for the future.

Of course, ICE and CBP are only part of the equation.

Many of the problems that contributed to the Christmas Day incident were intelligence and information sharing failures.

As Secretary Napolitano has stated, DHS is largely a consumer of the watchlists.

We need to make sure we get that ICE and CBP – as our frontline officers and agents at America's land, sea, and airports – get the information they need to do their jobs.

Pre-Screening Passengers is one of our last lines of defense in securing our skies.”